

American

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President Obama, Prime Minister Cameron Reaffirm Commitment to Afghanistan

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — A key component for peace in Afghanistan is to build the country's capacity so that its security forces "can take responsibility for their future," President Obama said after meeting with British Prime Minister David Cameron at the White House.

At a joint press conference July 20, Obama and Cameron said they both agree that the right strategy is twofold: break the former Taliban regime's insurgency and build Afghan capacity.

Cameron, in his first visit as prime minister, said the American and British relationship is strong because it delivers for both nations, and because it is a partnership of choice. "To me, it is also an absolutely essential relationship if we're going to deliver the security and the prosperity that our people need," he said.

"On Afghanistan, there is no clearer, no more tangible illustration of Britain and America standing shoulder to shoulder in our national interest than this mission that we are engaged in together," Cameron said.

Obama and Cameron evaluated the current Afghanistan strategy and its progress, and reaffirmed their commitment to the mission. A critical part, essential for the transition to Afghan control, is preparing the Afghan National Army and police to provide security for their country.

The Afghan government presented plans July 20 at an international conference, representing 40 nations and 80 delegations, meeting in Kabul to implement President Hamid Karzai's commitment to improve national security, economic growth, governance and the delivery of basic services. The Karzai government also presented a peace and reconciliation plan to get the Taliban insurgents to lay down their arms, which Obama said the United States supports.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton led the U.S. delegation to the Kabul conference, after attending U.S.-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue meetings in Islamabad July 18-19.

According to Obama, the Kabul conference yielded an agreement for transitioning the security of Afghanistan's provinces to the control of Afghan security forces. And Afghanistan and Pakistan have agreed to increase economic opportunities on both sides of the border, signing the first trade agreement between the two

countries in decades, he added.

"These are all important achievements, and they go a long way towards helping create the conditions needed for Afghans to assume greater responsibility for their country," Obama told reporters. The United States is planning to begin transitioning some of its military forces out of Afghanistan next year, as conditions permit, he said.

"This is not an easy fight, but it is a necessary one," Obama said. Terrorists trained in Afghanistan and the tribal regions along the Pakistani border have killed innocent civilians in the United States and Britain, he said. A wider insurgency in Afghanistan would mean a larger safe haven for al-Qaida and its affiliates to plan their next attacks.

Cameron said he and Obama also agreed during their meeting in the Oval Office on the need to reinvigorate the political strategy for Afghanistan. "Insurgencies tend not to be defeated by military means alone. There must also be political settlement," he said.

One part of the proposed reconciliation process is for Taliban insurgents to cut themselves off from the Taliban and al-Qaida and accept the Afghan constitution so they can have a future in a peaceful Afghanistan, Cameron said.

Treasury's Geithner Says Chinese Currency Is Undervalued

Says U.S. will closely monitor renminbi appreciation

By Phillip Kurata
Staff Writer

Washington – Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner has told Congress that the Chinese currency, known as the yuan or renminbi, is "undervalued" following a move by the Chinese government in June to allow greater flexibility for the yuan to appreciate.

"What matters is how far and how fast the renminbi appreciates," Geithner said in a statement July 8 when the Treasury Department sent to Congress its latest Semi-Annual Report on International Economic and Exchange Rate Policies. Significantly, the report did not say that the Chinese government engages in currency manipulation. Such a determination would have triggered negotiations between the U.S. and Chinese governments and would have created the possibility of higher U.S. tariffs on Chinese imports.

In July 2008, the Chinese government set the exchange rate of the yuan at about 6.83 to the dollar. It announced greater exchange rate flexibility June 19. Since then, the currency has appreciated less than 1 percent.

Many U.S. lawmakers have charged that the Chinese government keeps the yuan exchange rate artificially low in order to support its exports.

Senator Charles Schumer of New York called the Treasury report "disappointing." "It's clear that it will take an act of Congress to do the obvious and call China out for its currency manipulation," Schumer said in a statement.

Senator Max Baucus of Montana said in a statement that China took a "small step" in June to allow the yuan to appreciate, and added, "Small steps are not enough."

"China must take significant steps to appreciate its currency and I expect those steps to happen soon," he said.

Representative Sander Levin of Michigan said if China does not allow the yuan to appreciate much higher, the U.S. government should consider bringing a trade case against China at the World Trade Organization. "There is no real question that China's exchange rate policy is unfair, contributes to global trade imbalances and costs the United States jobs and economic growth, particularly in the manufacturing sector," Levin said in a statement.

"We will closely and regularly monitor the appreciation of the renminbi and will continue to work toward expanded U.S. export opportunities in China that support employment in the United States, in close consultation with Congress," Geithner said.

The U.S. trade deficit with China grew from \$84 billion in 2000 to \$227 billion in 2009, according to the U.S.-China Business Council. China's global trade surplus at the end of 2009 stood at \$196 billion, according to the council.

United States Repatriates Ancient Khmer Statues to Cambodia

Long-lost treasures returned to Cambodian home

By Alexis R. Carter
Staff Writer

Washington — U.S. Under Secretary of State William Burns saluted Cambodian culture in a repatriation ceremony for seven Khmer artifacts at the National Museum of Cambodia in Phnom Penh July 18.

"Our efforts to return these artifacts exemplify the respect we have for Cambodian historical patrimony and culture, and are the result of the hard work of countless law enforcement officials in the United States, the outstanding support of the United States Navy, and the determination of our diplomats here in Phnom Penh to ensure that they be returned to Cambodia as soon as possible," Burns said.

Officials joining Burns at the ceremony included

Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister Men Sam An, Cambodian Minister of Culture and Fine Arts Him Chhem and Acting U.S. Deputy Director of Homeland Security Matt King.

"I am pleased to express deep thanks to America's generous people and government for returning the seven pieces of Khmer artifacts to the Royal Government of Cambodia. Returning these items is like returning the souls of Khmer ancestors to their bodies after dozens of years of separation and so reviving the bodies," Him Chhem said.

Cambodia has suffered from an antique smuggling problem since its three-decade civil war, which ended in 1998.

The repatriation of these artifacts demonstrates the U.S. commitment to return stolen cultural antiquities to their originating countries. In 2003 the United States and Cambodia endorsed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to protect Cambodian artifacts from illegal importation into the United States.

Under this agreement, ancient Cambodian stone, metal and ceramic archaeological findings cannot be imported into the United States unless Cambodia approves an export permit or the item left Cambodia prior to the start of the agreement. In 2008 the MOU was amended to protect Bronze Age and Khmer Age artifacts.

The United States returned the seven smuggled artifacts to Cambodia aboard the hospital ship USNS Mercy June 17, U.S. embassy spokesman John Johnson said. Buddhist priests blessed the items upon their return.

Dating back to the 11th and 12th centuries at the height of the Angkor period, the artifacts are seven Khmer sandstone sculptures of human figures, lions and dragons.

In 2008 U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) found the artifacts during an Operation Antiquity raid in Los Angeles. ICE agents identified the sandstone sculptures in undercover operations and subsequently prosecuted the members of an illegal antiquities trafficking organization that was responsible for smuggling Thai and Cambodian artifacts into the United States for about 20 years. The traffickers initially smuggled the sandstone sculptures into Thailand and then brought them to the United States.

Since this program started, a total of 27 stolen Cambodian artifacts have been sent back. In 2007 the U.S. government returned a Cambodian sandstone carving of an Apsara dancer from the year 1200. In addition to returns made by the U.S. government, several antiques have been

repatriated to Cambodia by private citizens and U.S. museums.

Under Secretary Burns pledged continued U.S. support to preserve Cambodian artifacts. "We remain committed to helping Cambodia preserve its cultural heritage, and it is our sincere hope that efforts such as Operation Antiquity will lead to the end of the scourge of illegal antiquities trafficking," Burns said.

Preparations Under Way for Storm Season in Haiti

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — While longer-term planning is under way for Haiti's reconstruction, an aggressive effort is being made to prepare Haitians for potentially severe tropical storms and a dangerous hurricane season, as well as the flooding and landslides that accompany them, a senior U.S. development official says.

Most people living in the Port-au-Prince region, the area most devastated by the January 12 earthquake, are at greatest risk from the rains and flooding that come with the storm season in the Caribbean, says Paul Weisenfeld, Haiti Task Team coordinator for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

"The concern has been directed at leveling ground, distributing gravel, clearing drainage canals, building ditches so that water can be channeled, so that we reduce the risks of flood," Weisenfeld said at a Washington Foreign Press Center briefing on Haiti at six months. "It was a large effort and a lot of money has been spent on that, and that's an ongoing effort."

While planning continues for rebuilding Port-au-Prince and the other areas damaged by the magnitude 7.0 earthquake, work also has to be done to prepare the survivors and those displaced by the earthquake for what may come in the form of tropical storms and hurricanes.

"We are also trying to get people into shelters. That obviously is the better medium to long-term solution," Weisenfeld said July 19.

Weisenfeld told reporters that planning for the storm season began in April with United Nations agencies and the U.S. Defense Department when military units were still working on the recovery phase. Part of the effort was to identify the displaced camps that were most at risk for flooding and landslides.

Approximately 7,500 people were moved to higher ground. A number of engineering fixes were made at other camps, about 20 in total, to reduce their risk for flooding and landslides, Weisenfeld said.

"Any kind of major storm passing through the city of Port-au-Prince, when you have a displaced population that large, is extremely worrisome," he said.

RECONSTRUCTION PLANNING

The other half of the overall problem is the reconstruction effort, Weisenfeld said. World Bank economists estimated that it would take seven to 10 years to fully rebuild Port-au-Prince and the surrounding areas. Weisenfeld said it is obvious that reconstruction to make Haiti better than before the earthquake is a multiyear effort.

Long-term sustainability requires working through the Haitian government and institutions, he added.

"Obviously, [the government has] been weakened tremendously by this earthquake, so at the same time that we implement reconstruction programs, we need to strengthen government institutions so that we can work through them," he said.

USAID, U.N. aid groups and the nongovernmental organizations that are working together are looking at ways to employ new technologies to be more innovative in reconstruction and to "help Haiti leapfrog its current technological status," Weisenfeld said. One example recently launched is mobile banking in conjunction with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

A similar program has been used in Kenya and the Philippines. "Haiti is a country where prior to the earthquake 90 percent of Haitians never had access to banking services or never used a bank," Weisenfeld said, "but Haitians have large access to mobile phones."

"If people have banking services and they can make payments easier and start to save money, it reduces costs and improves the efficiency of the system and basically helps people advance more economically."

HOUSING AND FOOD

Housing is critical to helping Haitians re-establish their lives and livelihoods, Weisenfeld said, as is feeding the population and maintaining a productive agricultural sector. Seeds and fertilizers were distributed to Haitian farmers so they could plant their crops on schedule and keep the country from spiraling down into a cycle of food insecurity.

Providing transition housing is now under way and funding was provided for at least 7,500 houses, Weisenfeld said. The international community, including the United States, has provided about 5,000 houses from that total. An assessment by engineers of about 170,000 houses and buildings in the Port-au-Prince area found 46

percent to be habitable, which was a welcome surprise, Weisenfeld said.

Some of the housing was immediately available, some required minimal reconstruction and others will require more extensive work. Grants have been made to get the reconstruction work on houses going, Weisenfeld said.

"So getting that work done and getting people to move back to the community is going to be a large effort," Weisenfeld told reporters.

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